



# Medicare Bill OKd

## Marathon House vote sends measure to Senate

By Elaine S. Povich and Deborah Barfield Berry  
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Washington - The U.S. House yesterday capped a three-hour arm-twisting marathon and passed the most sweeping Medicare bill since the program's inception in 1965, sending the measure to the Senate, which began debate in a rare Saturday session.



The Senate debate, while important, paled by comparison to the drama in the House. House debate on the bill, which contains the first-ever Medicare prescription drug program, began at 9:45 p.m. Friday and the voting did not end until almost 6 a.m. yesterday.

Republican leaders began the vote at about 3 a.m. and refused to bring down the gavel on what is supposed to be a 15-minute voting period, holding the vote open for the longest time in House history - nearly three hours - as they appeared to be losing by two votes. They begged, pleaded and pressured Republicans who had opposed the measure to switch sides.

Finally, Republican Reps. Ernest Istook of Oklahoma, C.L. "Butch" Otter of Idaho and Trent Franks of Arizona reluctantly agreed to support their president, George W. Bush, and their leadership, to give their party the victory. The three conservatives had opposed the Medicare expansion on philosophical and budget grounds. The vote eventually was 220-215, as several other members also changed sides when the victory was assured.

The bill would give about 40 million older and disabled Medicare recipients drug coverage under the program and make other significant changes.

All New York Republicans supported the measure; all New York Democrats opposed it.

"I did not want to vote for this bill," Otter admitted later. He said he was persuaded that if the bill went down, another one would come before the House even less to his liking.

The procedure drew outrage from Democrats, many of whom thought the bill did not provide sufficient aid to seniors. House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) complained that Republicans were being "unfair."

"I have never seen such an undemocratic subversion of the will of the House," said Hoyer, a 22-year veteran. "Republicans were defeated according to the rules, and they then changed

the rules to claim 'victory.'"

House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) insisted the bill had to pass to update Medicare for the future.

"Today, we will pass this historic piece of legislation and tomorrow we will tell our nation's senior citizens that we have finally delivered a modernized Medicare system with a prescription drug benefit," Hastert said following a long night on the House floor.

And Bush, in his radio address broadcast only hours after the vote, said the House "made significant progress toward improving the lives of America's senior citizens." He called on the Senate to follow suit. White House officials said the president telephoned members of Congress from Air Force One as it was flying home from London as well as calling several in the middle of the night - a rare exercise for a president who is said to like his sleep.

"It was like the West Wing meets the Twilight Zone," Rep. Steve Israel (D-Huntington) said of the three-hour scene in the House. He said it was "deathly quiet" on the floor, with little knots of lawmakers conversing in various places as leaders pressed their members for votes.

"These Republicans don't lose," said Israel, who voted against the measure after weeks of being on the fence.

Israel said if there is any good news coming out of the vote it is that the bill contains a provision, which he authored, to increase the payments to Medicare HMOs in an attempt to keep them from abandoning high-priced areas like Long Island. But he said he opposed the bill because he is afraid it will eventually destroy Medicare.

The Alliance for Retired Americans, a group composed mostly of retired union workers, called the three-hour vote "disgraceful."

"This is a sad day for America's seniors," the group, which opposed the bill, said in a statement. "In the dead of night [House Majority Leader] Tom DeLay and the Republican leadership worked against America's seniors."

Rep. Charles Rangel (D-Harlem), a negotiator who was not allowed to participate in the talks, said Republicans tried to rush through the bill in the "dead of the night" and right before Thanksgiving.

"This was not really about prescription drugs, it was about the Republicans enacting a plan to get rid of Medicare," he said in a statement.

Rep. Carolyn McCarthy (D-Mineola) said, "It damages the safety net we've stitched for our vulnerable seniors."

The victory came in part because of support from the AARP, the nation's largest senior group. The group, which has come under fire from some Democrats and seniors for that endorsement, said the measure was a good first step.

"This is an important step toward fulfilling a longstanding promise to older and disabled Americans and their families," the AARP said in a statement. "While this legislation is not perfect, it will help millions of people, especially those with low incomes and high drug costs."

The Senate was expected to complete debate tomorrow. Passage there was likely to be easier than in the House, although many Democrats oppose the measure, which they say would take the Medicare program too far toward becoming a private industry program.

Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) yesterday told reporters he intends to filibuster the measure. "I have a deal for them," he said. "Give this bill a fair vote in the House and I'll drop my filibuster."

Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) plans to break the filibuster on Monday.

"The Congress will be voting on a measure that will undermine Medicare," said Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.) one of three current senators in office when the federal program was created in 1965 as part of President Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society."

This story was supplemented with wire service reports.

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